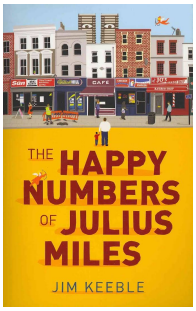
The Happy Numbers of Julius Miles by *Jim Keeble*. Alma Books, 2012, (283 p.) isbn 978-1-8468-8181-7





Jim Keeble

The Julius Miles of the title is a mathematician living in a multicultural society of East London. He is a loner, a bit socially defective and shy, but soft hearted, and a very big man: a gentle giant. Being a mathematician means here: obsessed by numbers, a bit autistic, and working as a statistician at the nearby hospital. He lives in a house that he inherited from his uncle Gus, a rich extravert womaniser, operating on the boundaries of the law. Next door he rents out a shop to a 39 year old woman Daisy Perkins. There is some 'electricity' between Julius and Daisy, but since she was one of the 'girls' of his uncle, he stays away from her except one time when she was behind with the rent. Then there is Larry Silk, an accountant for the criminal network of a ruthless Jay Munnelly. Larry also 'uses' Daisy's shop to whitewash some of the illegally earned money. Some day Julius finds Daisy dead on the floor. Accident or murder remains unclear. She leaves behind a four year old son Arnold who is taken care of by a Somali woman Awa Yasin, who is also looking after her depressed father.

Both Larry and Julius assume they are the father of Arnold and take occasionally care of the boy. So the story starts as a kind of detective thriller. How did she die? What exactly was going on in her shop? If her dead was not an accident, then who murdered her and why? The weirdest character of the novel is Kevin whose father was a policeman who died of cancer. This Kevin had a sex-operation and as a transgender she now calls herself Felicity and she is telling the whole story of the novel. She considers herself as a kind of Cupid or guardian angel, trying to arrange love affairs or to look after people. She is also trying to unravel the true story of what has happened and behaves like a private detective, working on his (or her) own account. She is shadowing people remaining unseen, observing them with binoculars, breaking into houses to get extra information or to listen to conversations, but not intervening and staying out of sight as much as possible. The reader is discovering the events by looking over her shoulder.

So what starts as a thriller with some surprising plot twists, lingers on and becomes a bit of a mealy soft love story and the clumsy characters, unable to utter openly their feelings, are just missing a happy relationship that is meant to be. It is all told in a telegraphic street language ministering the background of the characters in spoonfuls. The narrator Felicity is not the angel that she tries to be. She is addicted to drugs and has police as well as criminal connections. The reader should be flexible to accept less realistic or hard-to-believe events. The story is a bit cartoon-like with extreme characters acting as caricatures.

There are occasionally some mathematics involved. Julius recites in his head all kinds of numbers and statistics when he arrives in a stressful situation. He falls asleep trying to produce an infinite sequence of elliptic curves containing a length-10 arithmetic progression. At the age of 40 Julius and his old school friend re-iterate their previous participation at the Mathematics Olympiad in Cambridge and we are presented four genuine questions (no solutions) they have to solve in three and a half hours. Also the happy numbers of the title refer to a mathematical definition. Take a positive integer and generate a sequence by taking the sum of squares of its digits and iterating this process. If the sequence ends in the number 1, then the original number is called a happy number. Perhaps an unfortunate definition because a happy number will always end in a lonely singular '1'. The dramatic end of the novel happens on Arnold's fourth birthday, and 4 is an unhappy number. Unhappy numbers are not so exceptional. The sequence of unhappy numbers is 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20,... (OEIS A031177).

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